Did Prophet Muhammad ﷺ Read the Talmud? Evidence of the Qur'an's Miraculous Nature in Surah Al-Ma'idah

Introduction

In the study of comparative scripture and the history of religious law, the relationship between the Qur'an and the traditions of previous scriptures constantly presents deep layers of miraculous insights. One of the fundamental concepts in Qur'anic theology is its position as **Muhaymin**—a term enshrined in Surah Al-Ma'idah, verse 48, which means a guardian, corrector, touchstone, and controller over the truth of previous scriptures.

This dimension of scholarship becomes even more compelling when connected to the concept of **i'jaz tārīkhī** (historical-factual miraculous nature), especially when juxtaposed with socio-legal realities in the rabbinic legal tradition (Talmud), such as the shifting provisions of the law of retaliation (*qisas/lex talionis*) recorded in the discourse of Tractate Bava Kamma.

From Ayin Tahat Ayin to Financial Compensation: Changes in the Law in the Talmud

To understand the intersection between the Qur'an and Jewish legal tradition, we need to trace the fundamental differences between the Written Torah text (*Tanakh*) and the oral law codified in the Talmud.

1. Written Torah Text (Tanakh)

In the Book of Exodus (*Shemot*) 21:24–25 and Leviticus (*Vayikra*) 24:20, the Torah establishes the principle of *Lex Talionis* literally through the Hebrew phrase עַיִן תַּחַת עַיִן (*Ayin Tahat Ayin*), which means **"an eye for an eye"**—along with its complete literal provisions: **"tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, and bruise for bruise."**

2. Transformation in the Talmud

In the development of rabbinic law, the rabbis rejected the literal physical execution of these verses.

- **The Mishnah in Bava Kamma 83b** (*Talmud Bavli*) directly states that a person who injures another is obligated to pay five categories of compensation:

- **Nezek (נֶזֶק):** Permanent loss / depreciation of body value.
- **Tza'ar (צַעַר):** Pain.
- **Rippuy / Refuah (רִפּוּי):** Medical expenses.
- **Shevet (שֶׁבֶת):** Loss of income.
- **Boshet (בּוּשֶׁת / בְּשֶׁת / בֹּשֶׁת):** Shame / humiliation.
  (In this Mishnah, there is no discussion whatsoever regarding the possibility of physical punishment).

- **The Gemara in Bava Kamma 83b–84a** explicitly discusses the rabbis' question: *"Why pay money? Doesn't the Torah say 'an eye for an eye'?"* They then reject literal interpretation using various arguments (comparison with compensation for livestock, the impossibility of absolute physical equality, and the principle of equal law).

- The conclusion: this Talmudic ruling is understood as **binding reinterpretation (a ruling that replaces)**, not merely an option. *"עַיִן תַּחַת עַיִן"* is definitively interpreted as *mammon* (financial compensation), not physical retaliation. This is not an option left to the victim (to choose between physical retribution or money), but rather the only legally valid method according to *halakha*. Literal views (such as those attributed to R. Eliezer) were rejected or reinterpreted to remain consistent with financial compensation.

3. Binding Status and Historical Practice Reality

Practically speaking, this Talmudic ruling abolished the enforcement of physical *qisas* (corporal retribution) throughout the majority of Jewish history following the Second Temple period:

- **Historical Practice:** There is no evidence that rabbinic Jewish courts (*Beit Din*) ever systematically applied physical punishments such as “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” after the Talmudic period. Early sources such as Flavius Josephus (late 1st century CE) noted that victims had the option to accept money, but after the era of the Tannaim and the Talmud, that physical option was totally eliminated by Rabbinic Judaism, which established financial compensation as an absolute obligation.

- **Authority Limitations & Poskim:** Since the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE), the authority of Jewish courts has been extremely limited under Roman, Persian, Christian, and Muslim rule, generally handling only civil matters and fines. In the Middle Ages and beyond, major *poskim* such as Rambam (Maimonides) in the *Mishneh Torah* (Hilchot Chovel u-Mazik) emphasized that the law mandates monetary payment (as part of the *Oral Law* received through transmission), and no *Beit Din* ever administered corporal punishment of equal measure for non-fatal injuries.

- **Exceptions and Nuances:** For murder (a life for a life), capital punishment theoretically remained, but procedural requirements were extremely stringent (eyewitnesses, warnings, a Sanhedrin of 23 judges, etc.), making it virtually never applied after the Temple's destruction (even the Talmud states that a Sanhedrin executing someone once in 7 or 70 years is considered "bloodthirsty"). There were rare exceptional instances where Jewish courts in certain regions (e.g., medieval Muslim Spain) administered corporal or even capital punishment as *hora'at sha'ah* (emergency decrees) to protect the community, but this was not standard *lex talionis*. Meanwhile, non-rabbinic groups like the Karaites (8th–9th centuries CE onward) briefly demanded literal enforcement, but they were a small minority and did not represent mainstream Judaism.

In the majority of rabbinic Jewish history (approximately the past 1,800 to 1,900 years), physical *qisas* for bodily injury was never practiced, having been entirely replaced by this financial compensation system.

Qur'anic Redactional Correction

The Qur'an arrived in response to this legal dynamic by recording the substance of the original Torah law in detail within Surah Al-Ma'idah, verse 45:

وَكَتَبْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ فِيهَا أَنَّ النَّفْسَ بِالنَّفْسِ وَالْعَيْنَ بِالْعَيْنِ وَالْأَنْفَ بِالْأَنْفِ وَالْأُذُنَ بِالْأُذُنِ وَالسِّنَّ بِالسِّنِّ وَالْجُرُوحَ قِصَاصٌ ۚ فَمَن تَصَدَّقَ بِهِ فَهُوَ كَفَّارَةٌ لَّهُ ۚ وَمَن لَّمْ يَحْكُم بِمَا أَنزَلَ اللَّهُ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ

- **Translation:**
  “And We ordained for them therein that a life is for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, and for wounds is legal retribution. But whoever gives up his right as charity, it is an expiation for him. And whoever does not judge by what Allah has revealed – then it is those who are the wrongdoers.”

This redactional presentation demonstrates precision in reflecting the literal phrasing of the original Torah law while adding the dimension of forgiveness as an expiation (*kafarat*). The Qur'an thus positions itself as a reminder and corrector of practices that had shifted.

Epistemological Impossibility and Notes on Classical Mufassirin

Here lies the epicenter of the historical miracle (*i'jaz tārīkhī*). This section rests on the concept of **epistemological impossibility**, meaning the rational and source-based impossibility for Prophet Muhammad ﷺ to access or know internal Jewish legal discussions (such as the Talmudic debates in Tractate Bava Kamma) through conventional human channels in 7th-century CE Arabia.

This aspect of epistemological impossibility encompasses several points:

- **Limitations of Time and Space:** Prophet Muhammad ﷺ lived among the illiterate (*ummi*) society of the Hejaz, far away from the rabbinic academies in Babylonia and Palestine where the two Talmuds were compiled.

- **Esoteric Nature of Knowledge:** The codification process of the Talmud was internal, written in high-level Aramaic, and lacked wide Arabic translations during that era. Although Jewish communities existed in the Arabian Peninsula, detailed internal jurisprudential discussions such as the *sugya* in Bava Kamma 83b–84a constituted advanced specialist knowledge that was extremely difficult to access.

Another crucial fact: **the majority (almost all) of classical commentators (mufassirin) did not connect QS 5:45 specifically to the Talmudic discussion** regarding the shift from "eye for eye" to financial compensation.

Commentators such as Ibn Kathir, Al-Tabari, and Al-Qurtubi focused their discussions on:

1. Failure to apply the law of qisas fairly (the classic example being the differential treatment between Banu Nadir and Banu Qurayza in cases of murder and blood money/diat).
2. Altering other laws present in the Torah, such as the punishment of stoning for a married adulterer (*muhsan*).

They did not mention Bava Kamma, the five categories of compensation (*nezek, tza'ar*, etc.), or rabbinic debates regarding literal versus *mammon*. This further underscores that the historical information contained within the Qur'an—specifically the reaffirmation of literal Torah law amidst a practice that had long changed—surpassed the intellectual horizons of its time, even among classical commentators who lacked literary access to internal Talmudic manuscripts.

Conclusion

Through this comparative study, the position of the Qur'an as **Muhaymin** finds its validation. The Qur'an is not merely a moral text standing in a vacuum, but rather the "Judge of History" who is aware of the dynamics of legal change, distorted practices, and shifts in past religious traditions down to their jurisprudential details.

The alignment of the Qur'an's correction with the internal realities of Talmudic law—amidst the impossibility of information access for Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, and even amidst the ignorance of classical commentators regarding those Talmudic details—serves as strong evidence for the truth of prophethood and the truth of the Qur'an as divine revelation itself.